Tied up and branded

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Tied up and branded

by BumblebeesAndDandelions

Summary

Kids have been disappearing from all over Gotham. Jason decided to investigate and quickly finds himself captured as well.

Notes

June 1 - “You don’t want to do that” | Locked Door | Fear |

In retrospect, he should have expected something like this, and might have, if he'd had any sleep in the last several days. Black Mask was being far too willing to bargain, but time had been running out, and Jason had wanted, in some way, to prove himself. A look, I can save people too, I'm not the total failure you tell everyone I am. A stupid, naive hope that Batman wouldn't deride him so much, even if he never actually accepted Jason again. It might have worked better if he hadn't been captured.

Kids had been going missing from all over Gotham, even the richer neighborhoods, for weeks. The entire family had been out in force, searching, and Batman had finally looped Jason into their search two days ago. He'd been searching anyway, because they were kids and because they were being stolen from Crime Alley weeks before anyone else noticed, but the information Batman had was invaluable. Combined with his own, it led to Black Mask. Which led to this- locked in pitch black room, relieved of all his weapons and armor.

His head was pounding, they'd hit him hard enough to leave tacky blood trailing down his face. His wrists were cuffed together, looped around what felt like an old pipe. Through the pounding of his head, he could hear quiet, ragged breathing.

"Hello? Who's in here?"

The breathing quieted, and someone whimpered. It was a child. Fuck, that asshole locked him in with the kids.

"I'm not- they locked me in here too. Are you okay?"

Calm them down, assess the situation. He'd found the kids, even if this hadn't exactly been what he planned. He could still get out of this without being a complete failure.

There was a pause, and then, "Todd?"

No. Absolutely not. Fuck no. This could not be happening to him.

"Brat?"

"What are you doing here?" Fucking hell. Damian fucking Wayne was here. Why the hell hadn't Bruce told him Damian had been kidnapped? Did he not trust Jason with that information or did he just not care? With Bruce, it could have gone either way.

"The fuck do you think I'm doing here?"

"Father wouldn't have sent you, he doesn't trust you," the boy sneered. Fucking brat. He'd been a little horror when Jason was with the League, always reciting the code and being praised for any violence by his mother, Talia. Any good will Jason had towards the kid at first had been a product of his age and situation. He'd been raised on ruthless violence and with zero tolerance to weakness, and it showed. It had taken months for them to warm up enough to each other enough to parry insults back and forth, and they'd never really gotten past that stage, verbally.

He'd been pissed when Damian had turned up in Gotham barely a year after Jason returned, integrating into the family with an ease that Jason hadn't even had the first time around. He'd slipped seamlessly into a place that had been blocked off from Jason, and even if it wasn't the kids fault, he hated him for it sometimes.

"There's kids from the Alley here, Demon brat. He didn't even mention you were missing. Maybe he's hoping you'll die too, and he can make a little plaque right next to mine."

Damian growled at him, hitting something metal. Around him, kids began crying. Jason's eyes had adjusted enough to see the rows of cages pushed against the walls of the room, stacked two high. Each cage had at least one kid, often more. It was at least half the amount that had gone missing.

Damian's voice was coming from somewhere in the middle of the rows, where it was too see anything. If he was still here, it meant he couldn't pick the lock on the cage, and that he didn't have any trackers on him. He was lucky Jason kept tabs on the kids under his care.

"Okay, everyone but demon brat? I'm here to rescue you, you're going to be okay, I promise. Alley kids? You know me, you know what I do and how I do it. You're safe."

The crying didn't abate, but now kids were whispering among themselves, seemingly to decide if Jason was trustworthy, and if he could actually help, given he was chained up as well.

"Hood?" A tiny voice asked. The kid sounded tiny, and Jason's heart twisted. Fuck, he had to get them out of here, and soon, before anyone came in.

"You guessed it, kid. I got you, promise." He tugged experimentally at the pipe, making it creak with strain. He could break it, given enough force, but it wouldn't do anything for the door that was almost certainly locked, or the cages. He'd have to wait for someone to come in.

It took hours, during which Jason talked himself ear hoarse, spinning stories about the things he'd seen and the bad guys he'd beaten, occasionally interrupted by a child asking questions or a sarcastic comment from Damian. He told them about Kori's powers, Bizarro's metal skin and reverse Superman powers, told them about fighting aliens and dinosaurs.

Finally, finally, someone came in. It was a goon, massive and packed with muscle, and carrying a large box filled with single serve cereal containers. The man passed them through the bars to the kids, making his way towards Jason, laughing at the tears on the kids' faces and the way they flinched away from him.

Halfway through, the kids started acting up, yelling and screaming and grabbing at the man, loud enough to make Jason's ears start to ring again. The man dropped his box, swinging the baton that had been attached to his hip at the bars, rattling them. The kids flinched back, pressing themselves against the wall as much as they could, and began sobbing, but heaving things that wracked their tiny bodies. Jason wanted to tear the man apart, but he couldn't.

“Fucking brats! Keep your hands to yourself if you know what's good for you, or I might just tell Mask to drop all of you in the harbor.” He angled the baton so he could shove it through the bars, clearly intending to hurt the kids, and Jason had had enough.

“Hey asshole! You don’t want to do that. Trust me.”

It got the man’s attention. He turned towards Jason, storming up to him and sneering down at him. Was it stupid to antagonize an idiot with a weapon while heavily concussed and handcuffed to a wall? Sure. Made him stop scaring the kids, though.

“Who the fuck do you think you’re talking to, bitch? My boss fucking beat you, you’re dead.” He spat near Jason’s feet. Jason grinned up at him lazily, leaning back against the wall to brace himself.

“Been there, done that. I give it two stars, not eager to repeat. You though? I bet you’ll start crying before I even get going.” Jason’s smile widened into a shit eating grin, raising an eyebrow at the man. It worked, the man started cursing at Jason, a slew of vulgarity and threats, and he moved closer.

Jason threw himself away from the wall towards the man, ripping the pipe from the wall and bringing it down over the man’s head. The shock stunned the man, making him slow to react, and then Jason landed a hard enough hit to the man’s temple, and he dropped like a stone.

Behind him, Damian was already unlocking the cages, using the keys he had swiped from the man when the other kids had distracted him. Fuck, he loved that kid. The little terror had loved pickpocketing Jason when they were in the league, stealing anything he could and piling it up on Jason’s bed once he felt he had collected enough. Jason had started carrying sweets, now that he was in Gotham, so that Damian could still have something to steal that wasn’t just another weapon.

There were nearly twenty kids total, all grouped in the center of the room staring at him. They were all stick thin, some of them had trouble standing. They were likely the ones who’d been kidnapped first, forced into these cages for weeks. Right, being the only adult made him the refactor leader.

“Damian? You-“

“I will free the other children, I believe they are being kept nearby.”

“Right. I’ll clear out the rest of the building. All of you, stick with him, he’s one of mine, he’ll keep you safe.” A softer voice for the children, reassuring. The kids clung closer to Damian, allowing Jason to pass unimpeded to the door, unlocking it with the keys Damian had stolen before tossing them back to Damian.

He used the pipe on the first couple guys until he could steal a gun off one of the bodies. Then it was easy, a constant forward motion. Shoot, move forward, repeat. He had to clear the building before Damian was done freeing the kids, otherwise they’d be in danger. They were in a converted warehouse, three floors up, each one filled with the Black Mask’s goons. He didn’t waste time reloading, just dropped empty guns and took new ones off the bodies of

the men he killed. He hoped Damian had the sense to keep the kids away from his path of destruction.

As soon as he cleared the last floor, dropping the last guards with headshots, he was running back up the stairs to meet Damian halfway.

He was leading the mass of children, and in the light, Jason could see them clearer. They ranged from around five to Damian's age of fourteen. The littlest ones were being carried by the others, and there were probably upwards of fifty of them. He helped guide them out, as Damian fell to the back of the group to make sure no one fell behind.

It felt dreamlike, after the dark of the room and the blankness of the violence. He was holding the hand of a little girl with ratty blond pigtails, carrying a child in his arms and another on his shoulders. They were within feet of the door when the windows shattered.

Black shapes crashed through the windows, surrounding Jason and his train of children. Batman, accompanied by Kate, Spoiler, and Orphan.

"Step away from the children, Hood. This doesn't have to be a fight." Kate, Batwoman, ordered.

He ignored her. He was tired, concussed, injured from the fighting, and absolutely unwilling to allow these children to be taken. Behind him, Damian slipped through the mass of children to stand beside Jason.

There was an almost unnoticeable pause, as all of the bats had to decide how to talk to Damian while they were suited and he was in plain clothes. In the space left by the pause, Jason turned to Bruce, allowing some of his exhaustion to show, practically pleading with him.

Bruce softened, though whether it was a result of Damian standing beside Jason, the exhaustion clear on the faces of the children, or some emotion towards Jason, Jason wasn't sure.

"Hood, Oracle's already called the ambulances. The kids will be taken care of, but you'll be arrested if you're still here." He told him, in his usual gruff, mostly emotionless way. It was still a relief, that he wouldn't have to fight them too. He nodded, curt, and untangled himself from the children, murmuring reassurances and promising the few from the Alley that he'd check on them.

He left through a back door, and made it most of the way out of the warehouse district before Batman caught up to him with the near-silent whoosh of his grappling hook. Jason stopped, leaning tiredly against the brick wall of the alleyway.

"Come to yell at me for the bodies I dropped? Not really in the mood, to be honest."

"Thank you, Jason. You did good today. We only found the warehouse because of the notes you left on your own search. We owe you, I owe you." That must have hurt the old man to admit, and Jason smiled to himself at the thought.

“Why didn’t you tell me Damian had been kidnapped?” It had been bugging him, a splinter under his skin. He’d been trying, so hard, to be good enough for Bruce, and he couldn’t even be trusted to know that his brother had been kidnapped?

Bruce remained silent for long enough that Jason half suspected he had left, but, “… I didn’t know. He often disappears, I… I had wrongfully assumed this was more of the same. If you hadn’t found him, I don’t know how long it would have taken me to notice.”

“He’s my brother, of course I found him.” Fuck, this hurt. Maybe he should have just let himself be arrested, then we wouldn’t have to have this conversation with the man who had once been his father, until he’d died and their relationship had broken too badly to ever be repaired to the way it had been. They’d never be Batman and Robin again, never have the easy camaraderie and affection, and it hurt.

“He doesn’t disappear. Next time he does, ask me first, he’s usually just homesick, and I’m all he has from there.” A truth, offered for no reason other than, those children had trusted him, and Bruce had let him go, and maybe he wanted to try, just one more time, to repair this broken thing between them. He’d never be able to run crying into his fathers arms again, certain he’d make everything alright, and that was okay. Damian could have that now, he deserved it. Jason could be a big brother to Damian and as long as he was something to Bruce, he thought he’d be content.

Bruce considered his suggestion for a moment, nodding slightly. He paused, weighing his next words.

“The manor is always open, Jason. If you ever find yourself feeling homesick as well.” With that, he disappeared into the night, leaving Jason alone again in the alley.

He was going to go home, bandage his injuries and take too many pain pills, and go to sleep. In the morning, he’d have to check in on all of those kids. Soon, he’d have to find Black Mask and pay him back for all of this mess. But maybe, in the future, he’d feel homesick again, and this time, he’d have a place to go.

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